

HOW TO ESTABLISH AUTHORITY IN RELIGIOUS MATTERS

In society there is both the presence and the need for standards of authority to exist in order to govern people and to keep order. The supreme authority in the universe is God. He has revealed His word, which is the absolute truth, as the authoritative standard to guide and direct us in our decisions and to weigh our actions. Therefore, we should always seek to know and to implement His divine authority in matters of morality, religion and all spiritual things.

Before Jesus' crucifixion and after His death, He claimed to possess the divine right to command and to judge men's lives. Jesus said, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth." (Matthew 28:18) The Son's authority is revealed in His teachings, the gospel of Christ as recorded in the New Testament. The New Testament is the complete, absolute and infallible authority and standard for us today.

How do we determine what and how things ought to be done to please God? Determining what is obligatory must be based upon Biblical principles of communication. God has spoken to us through His Son (Hebrews 1:2), but His word is not recorded as a compilation of laws and amendments, such as our constitution. The format is biographical, historical and instructional. Thus we must seek out the doctrines of Christ that must be obeyed as we fill our hearts and minds with inspired words of God. "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." (II Timothy 2:15)

The authority of Christ is communicated by three methods. (1) Commands - direct precepts or statements. The statements must be ascertained as applicable to the reader today by the text. Such precepts may be a declaration, a commandment, a prohibition, a prophecy or even a rhetorical question. (2) Approved examples - a practice of the church in the New Testament under apostolic guidance and which the apostles received from the Lord. (3) Necessary inferences - something neither expressly stated, nor specifically exemplified, but is a logical conclusion [necessarily implied] based upon the Scriptures.

Jesus communicated His Father's will in these different ways. On the subject of God's law on marriage and divorce, He first referred back to an Old Testament Scripture and then uttered His commandment (Matthew 19:3-9). Divine authority was expressed by a command/direct statement. Earlier in Matthew 12:41-42, Jesus used the examples of the Ninevites and the Queen of the South to make a powerful point concerning the importance of receiving the truth. On a different occasion when questioned about the resurrection, Jesus drew a logical conclusion (necessary inference) from the statement - "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." (Matthew 22:23-33). [This was stated in Exodus 3:6 after those three men had died.] God is the God of the living, and therefore, there is a resurrection.

Faithful men, guided by the Holy Spirit, looked to the same rules of establishing divine authority on spiritual matters in Acts 15. The problem was that some men were teaching falsely about the Christians' relationship and responsibility to the law of Moses and circumcision. The apostle Peter related what transpired at the household of Cornelius in Acts 10 [approved apostolic example]. In Acts 15:7-9, Peter reflects back to the Holy Spirit's directions and confirmation when He was sent to preach the gospel to Gentiles. At that time the Holy Spirit revealed that God makes no distinction, and thus, they were commanded to be baptized, like Jews. The conclusion [necessary inference] was that no yoke, which was Moses' law and circumcision, was supposed to be required of the Gentile Christians (15:9-11). Jews and Gentiles receive salvation by God's grace the same way - obedience to the gospel of Christ. Quoting from the Old Testament, James showed that a direct prophecy about the salvation of the Gentiles (15:13-19; Amos 9:11-12) revealed the truth concerning God's plan for Gentiles.

Today, we must live according to God's will in everything we do and teach. "If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. . ." (I Peter 4:11). "Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son." (II John 9) God has spoken and revealed what He requires of us, and divine approval is based upon His established authority. Note that we will be judged by the word of the Lord (John 12:48). When we have a question about what is right or acceptable, we must search the holy Scriptures to discover what is the truth. For example, the whole truth concerning the Lord's memorial supper is revealed by commandment, example and necessary inference. These three methods of communication are used throughout the inspired word of God to reveal and to establish Christ's authority. We will give an account to Christ concerning all that we have done (or not done) on the judgment day.